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Corporate Social Advocacy: Medicine, Placebo or Poison?

**Opportunities and risks for companies and society – and
communicative alternatives**

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Executive Summary

In recent years, as societies have become increasingly polarized, companies have been positioning themselves on contemporary and controversial social issues ever more frequently. Over the last few years, there has been a boom in publications on corporate social advocacy (CSA) and in particular in (mostly experimental) stakeholder surveys. This is the starting point for this paper, which goes on to present a theoretical framework and outline practical implications. The paper first discusses the impact of CSA on companies and societal polarization based on existing studies and theoretical considerations (neo-institutionalism). It is clear that CSA appears to be at best a placebo for companies, as large companies with heterogeneous stakeholders in particular are likely to lose more supporters than they gain through such practices. For society, CSA is a poison because it further drives societal polarization. Therefore, companies are not only exacerbating the problems they sought to solve by using CSA, but are also increasingly having to justify their decision not to use CSA. Thus, it appears that it is high time CSA is brought to an end in the interests of both companies and society as a whole. Lastly, concrete alternatives and ways out are outlined. In essence: A medicine to counteract the poison of CSA is presented.

Keywords: corporate social advocacy, CEO activism, polarization, public relations, strategic communication

Corporate social advocacy: medicine, placebo, or poison?

Opportunities and risks for companies and society – and communicative alternatives

Introduction

In recent years, companies seem to be positioning themselves more and more frequently on contemporary and controversial social issues. Whereas, just over a decade ago, only a few companies, such as *Amazon* or *Starbucks*, stood up for same-sex marriage, while *Chick-fil-A* and *Barilla* spoke out in support of the traditional family image (Dodd & Supa, 2014), nowadays companies increasingly have to justify their actions when they choose to refrain from such public positioning. Within just a few years, this so-called *corporate social advocacy* (CSA) has become a practice that is now widely expected by stakeholders (Austin et al., 2019, p. 14) and appears to be widespread – even if there have not yet been any studies on its dissemination. When a relatively new practice becomes so widespread within a short period of time, it is to be expected that its positive effects – as with a medicine – are considered to have been proven. Indeed, according to DiRusso et al. (2022, p. 2): “Overall, data suggest that CSA is a positive strategy for corporations in the long run.” In contrast to this positive assessment, in which the authors cite studies that appear clear (e.g., Chatterji & Toffel, 2018; Dodd & Supa, 2015, 2014), many studies have come to more negative conclusions, especially in recent years (e.g., Abitbol et al., 2018; Klostermann et al., 2022). For instance, the risks of boycotts appear to be greater than the opportunities offered by buycotts (Jungblut & Johnen, 2022).

Such a negative effect on consumers would be manageable if CSA, like CSR, were to be interpreted primarily in terms of the assumption of social responsibility and its societal consequences (e.g., Waymer & Logan, 2021). From this business ethics perspective, positive effects for society would be more important than direct economic benefits. The problem: If you

look at the issues of older CSA activities (e.g. discrimination, gun control), you can see that many of these social issues have become the subject of ever more controversial discussion today. Not only have many of these issues not been resolved, but there has also been an increase in societal polarization on these and other issues in many Western democracies (e.g. on gun control in Miller, 2019). Since the societal impact of CSA is closely linked to its impact on the CSA-driving company and on other companies, there are three levels to the central research question: *What impact does CSA have in polarizing societies (a) for the CSA-driving company, (b) for other companies and (c) for society? (RQ1)* This paper thus addresses a perspective that has been largely absent from the CSA discourse to date: the societal perspective. Despite how frequently the polarization of societies is seen as the cause of CSA, its impact on society is rarely addressed (Parcha, 2023; Rim et al., 2020). This also means that, as honorable as the motives are for CSA – such as standing up for minorities – in many cases the question that arises is: How helpful is a well-intentioned CSA activity if it exacerbates rather than improves the problem?

This paper seeks to answer that question on the basis of existing studies and theoretical considerations. Since the impact of CSA also depends on how widespread the CSA practice is, its diffusion needs to be examined more closely. This process is described from a neo-institutionalist perspective because it links the meso with the societal macro level. In doing so, it frees organizations from the “iron cage” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) of rational decision-making and shows how organizations align themselves through an orientation towards perceived expectations. By linking the organizational perspective and its environments, it is possible to plausibly describe how the once-innovative practice of CSA was able to establish itself so quickly as a result of enormous pressure – regardless of its efficiency and effectiveness (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Tolbert & Zucker, 1996).

The analysis shows that CSA activities do not appear to be a problem-solving medicine for companies, but are, at best, a placebo remedy and often have negative effects for companies. Indeed, at the societal level there is much to suggest that CSA activities are poisonous if they lead to increased societal polarization. Given that it has also been shown that the pressure for companies to position themselves on current and controversial social issues is growing, concrete practical solutions are outlined from a neo-institutionalist perspective: *What alternatives to CSA are there for strategic organizational communication? (RQ2)* Before the two research questions are answered, the central elements of the CSA concept will first be explained.

Overall, the paper reaches a sobering conclusion: CSA pioneers have voluntarily positioned themselves on current and controversial social issues in order to do something good. While studies have long emphasized the positive effects of CSA for companies, more recent studies have come to ambivalent conclusions at best, with the negative effects often outweighing the positive. Today, it is apparent not only that CSA has actually exacerbated the social problems it was intended to solve, but that companies are increasingly under pressure to justify their decision not to use CSA. It therefore seems high time and in the interests of both companies and society as a whole that CSA be abandoned. The ways out and alternatives outlined in the conclusion can therefore be seen as a medicine to treat the poison of CSA.

Corporate social advocacy: the concept

Even though CSA is still a “relatively new concept” (Lim & Young, 2021, p. 2), a widely consensual understanding was established early on (Dodd & Supa, 2014, p. 5): CSA “refers to an organization making a public statement or taking a public stance on social-political issues”. The discussion of social or political issues is now examined in the literature using very different terms: from brand activism (Vredenburg et al., 2020) to corporate political advocacy (Weber et

al., 2023) to CEO activism (Rumstadt & Kanbach, 2022). The differences between the concepts are sometimes barely evident, with the same practical examples often used to illustrate different terms; sometimes, terms such as corporate political advocacy (CPA) and corporate social advocacy (CSA) are even used synonymously in a paper (Hoffmann et al., 2020; Parcha & Kingsley Westerman, 2020). References to corporate social responsibility are also frequently emphasized (Dodd & Supa, 2014; Waymer & Logan, 2021). In this paper, the more general term corporate social advocacy (CSA) is used because it encompasses a wide range of very different forms as a broader term: from statements in brand advertising as in brand activism (Vredenburg et al., 2020) to statements by CEOs in interviews as in CEO activism (Rumstadt & Kanbach, 2022) to showing explicit and public support for certain individuals, groups, or ideals and values with the aim of convincing and persuading others to do the same, as in CPA (Wettstein & Baur, 2016).

As the discourse on CSA “is still at an early stage” (Hoffmann et al., 2020, p. 157), the basic assumptions are elaborated below. Various central elements that appear important for answering the research questions will be put into more concrete terms.

The *(a) issues* of CSA are “contemporary and controversial social issues” (Parcha, 2023, p. 2) in “heated public debates” (Hoffmann et al., 2020, p. 156). The issues range from discrimination against different groups to gun control and climate change. While these topics may appear at first glance to be ‘exclusively’ social issues, their contemporary and controversial nature means that they are always political, because they relate to acceptance and, thus, the ability of an issue to win majority support. The political nature of these social issues is also reflected in the fact that the line of conflict generally runs along liberal and conservative positions (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021) – as the topics of same-sex marriage, climate change and immigration demonstrate. Thus, almost every CSA activity can be assigned to a political side. Most examples of CSA activities can be assigned to the liberal, progressive side; CSA

appears to be used more frequently by liberal companies. Wettstein and Baur (2016, p. 210) formulate the normative claim that “the benchmark for the legitimacy of a company's advocacy must indeed be the most basic ethical principles of equal human dignity and moral worth of all human beings”. However, this appears to be an implausible self-restriction that falls into the “political correctness trap” (Hoffmann et al., 2020, p. 157). Regardless of how little one may approve, it follows that statements against immigration are also a CSA issue. In contrast to CSA issues, CSR issues are more neutral, less divisive and therefore more likely to be legitimized by stakeholders (Ciszek & Logan, 2018; DiRusso et al., 2022; Gaither et al., 2018; Hydock et al., 2019; Marschlich & Bernet, 2024).

The CSA topics are also characterized by the fact that the *(b) economic reference of the topic to the organization is very indirect*: they have no “direct connection to the corporation's business practices” (Parcha, 2023, p. 2; Dodd & Supa, 2014). On the one hand, this distinguishes CSA issues from CSR issues that are directly related to the corporation's business practices, where CSR is defined as “the voluntary actions that a corporation implements as it pursues its mission and fulfills its perceived obligations to stakeholders” (Coombs & Holladay, 2012, p. 8). On the other hand, CSA differs from lobbying because it is concerned with influencing political issues in order to improve the political framework conditions for the company (Hydock et al., 2019, p. 77). A distinction must be made between the direct connection to the corporation's business practices and the fit with the perceived values of the company. A number of studies have shown a clear correlation between fit and positive stakeholder effects (K. H. Kim et al., 2024; E. Lee, 2023; E. Lee & Yang, 2024; Lim & Young, 2021; Parcha & Kingsley Westerman, 2020; Tsai et al., 2023; Yim, 2021).

In the case of *(c) target groups*, the literature focuses primarily on external stakeholders such as consumers (e.g., Hydock et al., 2019; Overton et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2022). However, CSA can also target activist groups (DiRusso et al., 2022; Dodd & Supa, 2014) or the public at

large (Dodd & Supa, 2015). The special calculation of CSA activities becomes clear here: on the one hand, they risk losing existing consumers who reject the position on the controversial issue, for example. On the other hand, they hope to use this positioning to gain the support of activist groups and, ultimately, new consumers for whom the company has become attractive only as a result of the CSA activity. Based on this, the goal that the company's position on the controversial issue should also be shared by large sections of consumers can be derived as a norm. Other stakeholders such as employees (Yang et al., 2022) are considered only marginally at best. The present paper assumes a broad understanding that CSA activities can be directed at all stakeholders.

There is a (supposed) contradiction in the *(d) objectives or intended effects*. In most cases, it is stated that the aim of CSA activities is to instrumentalize division or even polarization with their controversial issues and to provoke “divergent consumer reactions” (Hydock et al., 2019, p. 76). The company accepts the elicited disapproval and boycotts of those who oppose the company's position in order to strengthen ties with (existing and new) supporters and activist groups (Hydock et al., 2019, p. 76). This goal, which is relevant for the company's success, is to be achieved by CSA activities directly and explicitly aiming to support a cause or encouraging sociopolitical change (S. Y. Lee & Chung, 2023; Parcha & Kingsley Westerman, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020). While the opportunities of CSA activities are highlighted here, other authors point out that companies can no longer avoid political positioning and can only secure the license to operate with CSA activities (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021). This supposed contradiction will be resolved later.

CSA activities are ascribed a high *(e) financial relevance for the company*. How can this particular “emphasis on organizational financial outcomes” (Dodd & Supa, 2015, p. 289) be explained if CSA has no direct connection to the corporation's business practices (Dodd & Supa, 2014; Parcha, 2023)? For example, if positioning on controversial issues is increasingly

expected today (Austin et al., 2019) which may provoke very different reactions among consumers, it follows that both CSA activity and silence on controversial issues may have (financial) consequences.

In terms of *(f) forms*, CSA activities encompass all strategic communication practices, ranging from advertising (J. K. Kim et al., 2020; Weber et al., 2023), social media (Lim & Young, 2021; Rim et al., 2020) and official statements (Parcha & Kingsley Westerman, 2020; Waymer & Logan, 2021), to CEO statements (Dodd & Supa, 2015, 2014; Sauter & Jungblut, 2024).

The question of the *(g) planned or unplanned nature* of CSA activities is disputed in the literature. While almost all of the case studies discussed clearly have a planned character, Dodd & Supa (2014, p. 5) also classify “the case of a CEO making an off-the-cuff remark to a journalist” as a CSA activity. This broad understanding seems plausible, as it can be assumed that only a CEO who does not strictly reject planned CSA activities but refrains from carrying them out due to their risks is likely to make such a mistake.

This leads to the following understanding of CSA, which is the focus of the present paper: *Corporations are taking a stance on contemporary and controversial social and, thus, political issues that have no direct connection to the corporation's business practices in order to improve attitudes towards the organization among as many of the relevant stakeholders as possible, so that the financial successes outweigh the losses. This can involve all forms of strategic communication, which may also be planned or unplanned.*

Impact of corporate social advocacy

The impact of CSA is explained in the paper in respect of CSA-driving companies, in respect of other companies, and in terms of society as a whole. On the one hand, the focus is on communication effects and mass media effects in the sense of a “change in an outcome within

a person or social entity” (Potter, 2011, p. 903), which can be observed among stakeholders such as consumers, employees, or the public at large. On the other hand, these effects should be evaluated with regard to the impact on organizations and society as a whole. When assessing the impact for organizations, the focus is on the extent to which CSA contributes to the achievement of organizational goals (Buhmann & Volk, 2022; Zerfass et al., 2017). While contradictory goals such as market success or legitimacy can already be found here, a general assessment for the societal level is impossible. Therefore, only the impact on societal polarization will be explained. It will be necessary to differentiate between various impact dimensions: intended vs. unintended effects, cognitive, affectual vs. behavioral effects, short-term vs. long-term effects, direct vs. indirect effects (McQuail, 1987; Potter, 2011). In part, the effects and impact can be discussed on the basis of existing empirical studies; in part, conceptual-theoretical considerations are used.

As the societal effects also depend on how widespread the practice of CSA is, the question of how CSA has diffused must also be answered. The neo-institutionalist perspective appears helpful in describing this process because it links the meso and macro levels. It also emancipates itself from rational decision-making and shows how organizations align themselves through an orientation towards perceived expectations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Despite this focus on institutional isomorphism, innovations and institutional change can also be plausibly described and explained from this perspective (Dacin et al., 2002; Tolbert & Zucker, 1996). When the institutionalization of the practice of CSA is examined below, what is important is not the spread of this term (which is probably still relatively unknown in practice), but rather the practice of companies publicly positioning themselves on controversial issues.

(1) Impact for companies driving CSA

An institutionalization process begins with the emergence of something new, e.g. a new practice in general management or communication management. This first requires the perception of a problem that may result from changes in the environment, for example. In such a process of habitualization, new structural arrangements are generated in response to a specific organizational problem or set of problems (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Tolbert & Zucker, 1996). The central problem – and, thus, the central trigger – for the CSA practice is the growing polarization of many Western societies, which has been observed since the early 1990s, especially in the US (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021). While polarization can generally be understood as the simultaneous presence of opposing or conflicting principles (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008), what is particularly important is that polarization refers to the point where issue attitudes or ideology become the center of opposite poles in the self-identification of citizens (Stroud, 2008; van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021). It is only from this that the potential for one's own alignment with a political pole to influence actions in other social spheres follows. In other words: Only when political considerations also influence decisions such as the purchase of a product or the choice of a job does political polarization also become important for marketing. These marketing considerations are likely to have been at the heart of many advertising campaigns which, like the *Nike* campaign with Colin Kaepernick (Hoffmann et al., 2020; Waymer & Logan, 2021), are classified as CSA.

What impact can be observed for companies that engage in CSA? In recent years, the effects of CSA on *(a) external stakeholders* such as consumers have been examined particularly frequently (e.g., Hydock et al., 2019; Jungblut & Johnen, 2022; Xu et al., 2022). Some of these studies appear to confirm the positive effects. In Austin et al. (2019), various CSA campaigns were evaluated very positively overall (similarly Browning et al., 2020). The corporate reputation can benefit from CSA if it is perceived as authentic and fits the company's identity

and public expectations about its values (K. H. Kim et al., 2024; E. Lee, 2023; E. Lee & Yang, 2024; Lim & Young, 2021; Tsai et al., 2023; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Overall, DiRusso et al. are optimistic: “Overall, data suggest that CSA is a positive strategy for corporations in the long run.” (DiRusso et al., 2022, p. 2) However, even studies that emphasize the benefits of CSA come to an ambivalent conclusion: Positive effects depend to a large extent on the attitude towards the issue (e.g., Chatterji & Toffel, 2018; Dodd & Supa, 2015, 2014; Fitzgerald & Donovan, 2018; Hong & Li, 2020; Liu & Getz, 2024; Xu et al., 2022), so large companies with a heterogeneous target group are especially likely to quickly be among the losers (Hydock et al., 2020). In addition, there are now numerous studies that conclude that CSA activities have rather negative effects. A case study on *Starbucks* states that, although it did not suffer financially, the company’s reputation was negatively impacted (Abitbol et al., 2018). The findings of Klostermann et al. (2022), who observed a negative effect on consumers’ brand perceptions, which in turn were stronger for customers relative to non-customers, are clearer (similarly Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). The risks become even more apparent when weighing the disadvantages of boycotting against the advantages of buycotting: various studies have found that boycotting outweighs buycotting (Jungblut & Johnen, 2022; Friedman, 1996; Hydock et al., 2020). Negative information ought, therefore, to have a greater impact on purchasing decisions than positive information (Rozin & Royzman, 2001). In addition, in the case of boycotting, networks of boycotters are “very dense and highly connected among subgroups while that of advocates was sparse” (Rim et al., 2020, p. 1).

These critical findings on boycotting in particular lead to the assumption that the (often experimental) surveys on attitudes overestimate the positive effects of CSA, as they are unable to examine the long-term effects and, above all, the attitude-behavior gap (Boulstridge & Carrigan, 2000; Hydock et al., 2019). More specifically: If a CSA campaign is to be at least economically balanced, it would need to win a new customer for each one it loses. In line with

the phrase attributed to Michael Jordan, "Republicans buy sneakers, too" (Zilinsky et al., 2020, p. 144), the question that arises from a purely marketing perspective is whether the positive effects can actually outweigh the negative effects in the medium term.

The *(b) effects on employees* were examined much less frequently. Yang et al. (2022) came to the conclusion that CSA activities had a very positive effect on how employees advocate for the company (similarly Chatterji & Toffel, 2018; Y. Kim & Meganck, 2025; Yim, 2024). The conclusions reached by Park et al. (2025) were ambivalent: CSA strengthens trust in some businesses and leads to mistrust in others. The question facing these stakeholders also is to what extent the positive impact of greater identification outweighs the presumably more serious negative impact if even just a few employees who hold a contrary view on the issue resign, resign internally, or if conflicts arise within the workforce. In other words, even if a clear majority of employees support the CSA activity, the strong negative reaction of a small minority can cause tremendous damage.

Research has not even considered the impact on a company's *(c) scope for action*. Firstly, standing up for an issue makes it necessary to 'live' the advocated stance throughout the company in order to avoid accusations of hypocrisy. Secondly, standing up for same-sex marriage, for example, can give rise to the expectation that a company will also stand up for other minority rights. Thus, CSA can set the moral bar for a company very high. The associated risks have been examined in CSR research on the concept of backfiring (Koch & Viererbl, 2022).

To put it more precisely: At best, CSA can have a positive effect, like medicine, for smaller companies with extremely homogeneous stakeholders. For the vast majority of companies, however, it is likely to work at best like a placebo, and more often like a poison. The risks or presumed damage for companies would be manageable if CSA were interpreted in a similar way to CSR, primarily with a view to assuming social responsibility and as far as the societal

consequences are concerned (e.g., Waymer & Logan, 2021). In that case, the positive effects for society – from which companies would benefit indirectly, would be more important than direct economic benefits. It remains to be seen to what extent these can be observed.

(2) Impact for other companies

The question of the societal impact of CSA depends on how many companies engage in CSA. The diffusion process will therefore be described in the following from a neo-institutionalist perspective (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Tolbert & Zucker, 1996). The first imitations may have occurred after several companies discovered CSA in an increasingly polarized society : a company saw a CSA campaign by a competitor and copied it, developing its own CSA campaign. A major 'breakthrough' is often achieved by a case that has attracted a great deal of attention and was considered a great success. In the literature, this is variously attributed to *Amazon's* Jeff Bezos' public statements and his donation to support a same-sex marriage referendum. Very quickly, other large companies such as *Starbucks*, *Target*, *Absolut*, *Levis*, *Expedia*, and *Budweiser* positioned themselves with their support for same-sex marriage (Hydock et al., 2019, p. 77). In this phase of institutionalization, the so-called objectivation (Tolbert & Zucker, 1996), the predominant motive was initially still uncertainty and the dominant isomorphic mechanism was still imitation. The public attention to these campaigns sparked research interest. Early publications advanced the theorization of the problem, focusing primarily on the positive effects (e.g., Dodd & Supa, 2014; Witeck, 2014), and identifying the (supposedly objective) benefits of this practice, thereby contributing to the further diffusion of the practice. Hydock et al. (2019), for example, state that the activities on same-sex marriage were quickly followed by companies commenting on other topics such as gun control/rights, transgender issues, and immigration. Organizations then increasingly no longer adopt a practice out of uncertainty, but because they perceive a normative pressure that this is expected and that

they would otherwise jeopardize their legitimacy (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Tolbert & Zucker, 1996).

A distinction can therefore be made between two levels of institutionalization:

- *Issue level:* The activities of many companies on same-sex marriage are an example of how quickly an issue can become established. While the innovator can still differentiate itself from competitors by publicly positioning itself on this issue, following the first imitations, the point is quickly reached at which the normative pressure on companies to position themselves publicly on this issue becomes increasingly great.
- *CSA level:* The numerous statements on the issue of same-sex marriage issue have thus helped CSA achieve a breakthrough 'en passant'. Initially, there was only increasing pressure for companies to position themselves on the same-sex marriage issue, but it was this issue that led to the establishment of the practice of companies taking a public stance on an increasing number of relevant political issues. This paper focuses on the institutionalization of this level.

Even with a fully institutionalized CSA practice, there will always be new issues that go through an institutionalization process 'en miniature': The positioning of an individual company is followed by public statements from other companies, before the normative pressure on the companies that remain silent continues to grow, prompting many of them also position themselves publicly.

There are many indications in the literature that CSA practices have long since reached the stage where stakeholders and the public expect companies to take a public stance. Formulated from a neo-institutionalist perspective: The practice of CSA is likely to be in the full institutionalization stage (Tolbert & Zucker, 1996). While Dodd (2018, p. 233) still formulated this as an expectation for the future: “To maintain legitimacy, companies are increasingly expected to engage in social-political discourse and creation of public goods.”, Austin et al.

(2019) came to the clear conclusion in their survey just one year later that companies ought to position themselves. Subsequently, van der Meer & Jonkman (2021, p. 1) stated that “corporations are increasingly pressured to speak out and take a stance on social issues to engage with their environment and renew their social license to operate (SLO) in a context characterized by political divides.” The social license to operate (SLO) brings us back to the neo-institutionalist perspective: companies are increasingly complying with the (largely) institutionalized expectation to talk publicly about political issues in order to further increase their legitimacy or not to jeopardize it.

These considerations will need to be supplemented against the background of the societal consequences of CSA activities. Nevertheless, it is already clear here that CSA activities are a *rationalized myth* (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). They appear rational because companies can use CSA to fulfill an obligation that is often unquestioned today (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), namely to position themselves publicly on controversial issues. At the same time, they are a myth because their effectiveness is not questioned.

What impact does CSA have on other companies? In the early years of CSA, when there were only a few companies that took a stance on current and controversial social issues, it was not a problem for other companies if they refused to do so. The description of the institutionalization process of CSA shows the enormous change: Today, companies that refuse to engage in CSA often have to justify themselves publicly and may expect this to be interpreted as opportunism.

(3) Impact for society

Finally, the question arises as to what impact CSA has on society. A distinction can be made between effects on societal depolarization and polarization.

Impact on the depolarization of society

CSA makes a relevant contribution to depolarization if it helps one side of an issue to ‘prevail’, i.e. if polarization is resolved by the disappearance of one side. If many controversial issues are characterized by the fact that they run along the dividing line between liberals and conservatives, it becomes clear how small the likelihood is that one position will prevail. There is no known CSA issue that is no longer the subject of controversy.

Impact on polarization of society

This is in stark contrast to (a) a direct and (b) an indirect impact on growing societal polarization.

The *(a) direct* impact of CSA activities on societal polarization is shown by the fact that public positioning on issues updates the line of conflict that runs through a controversial issue. Even if societal polarization depends on many factors, it can be expected that a growing number of CSA campaigns will tend to fuel further polarization. CSA deepens, widens and consolidates the rifts between the respective groups. This is also supported by the fact that the issues of older CSA campaigns are being discussed more controversially than ever before. Not only have many issues not been resolved, but societal polarization on these and other issues has continued to grow in many Western democracies (e.g. on gun control in Miller, 2019).

Parcha’s proposition (2023, p. 896) makes it clear what effects this polarization can, in turn, have on CSA: “CSA and political polarization are (a) positively related to each other and are (b) bidirectional causes of each other.” In short, growing social polarization – whether as a

result of increasing CSA activities or other social developments – also increases the normative pressure on companies to position themselves politically (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021). From an analytical perspective, a distinction can be made between increasing polarization and increasing institutionalization as reasons for the diffusion of CSA practices. In practice, this increases the normative pressure to assume a position that companies perceive from stakeholders, pressure groups, or the public. The result: even more companies position themselves on even more controversial issues, thus contributing to further societal polarization.

Instead *(b) indirectly*, CSA fosters societal polarization when social conversational spaces are lost. This impact needs to be explained in more detail: There are different spheres in a society, such as the economy, politics, law, education and religion. Such spheres are explicitly or implicitly laid out in many sociological theories of society (e.g., Luhmann, 2012; Parsons, 1935). The actions in a specific sphere are based on the corresponding logic and the resulting constraints – in the economy, for example, purchasing decisions are made primarily with a view to scarce resources (Luhmann, 2012; Parsons, 1935). If everyone is included in these social spheres – e.g. as a consumer, as a student or as a defendant – it follows that there are very different affiliations to groups in different spheres. Opponents or competitors in one sphere (judge vs. defendant; Republican vs. Democrat; company A vs. company B) are on the same side in other contexts (e.g. family, sports club, religious community). However, when we speak of a politicization of consumption, sports, or churches (Bossy, 2014), the political lines of conflict and affiliations are ‘copied’ into other social spheres. There, however, they are primarily dysfunctional (e.g., in the economy) and thus deepen the social divide, because the political conflict line is increasingly shaping (non-political) roles.

This brings us to companies as employers, where employees spend much of their time. While the impending consequences for a CSA-driving company have already been described – internal politicization and polarization – this is not without indirect implications for society:

with increasingly politicized employees, further non-political spaces for dialogue are being lost for a society in which people were still able to talk to each other and communicate beyond political differences. In other words: Non-political companies contributed to the depolarization of society with these spaces for dialogue.

In summary, the description of the impact thus comes to a sobering conclusion. For companies, CSA works like a placebo at best. If one considers the indirect societal impact that companies suffer, the negative effects probably even outweigh the positive. For society, the growing number of CSA activities quite clearly has the effect of a poison, as they further drive societal polarization – although not alone, of course – and further minimize non-political spaces for discussion. This also means that, as honorable as the motives for CSA may be in many cases, even well-intentioned CSA activities often exacerbate problems rather than solving them. Therefore, a medicine to counteract the poison of CSA will be presented below.

Ways out for strategic organizational communication

The skeptical assessments of the impact of CSA, both for companies themselves and as it affects societal polarization, make it clear that abandoning CSA would be in the interests of all those involved. However, the description of the institutionalization process has shown how great the pressure on companies to engage in CSA has become. This leads to the question of whether, and how, strategic organizational communication can escape these institutional expectations. Since contradictions between institutional expectations are inevitable in modern, complex societies (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Brunsson, 2003; Greenwood & Hinings, 1996), organizations cannot meet all expectations equally. They can deal with such contradictions and thus try to evade institutional expectations in a number of different ways. Following Meyer &

Rowan (1977), various options are outlined and specific practical suggestions for organizations and communication professionals are provided.

One option is to *(a) reject the institutional expectation of public positioning* (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). A company could impose a 'ban on silence' on political issues: Controversial issues in particular and political issues in general would then be declared taboo topics in internal and external communication. This would mark a return to the old rules of business etiquette, according to which topics such as religion and politics should be avoided in small talk (Bowman, 2007). While this option still appears feasible in internal communication, it can be expected that the company would then be exposed to strong public criticism in external communication.

More evasive alternatives to this open refusal can be derived from Meyer & Rowan's (1977) concept of decoupling options. "Decoupling means that organizations abide only superficially by institutional pressure and adopt new structures without necessarily implementing the related practices" (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2017, p. 80). A first possibility for decoupling is to replace categorical ends with technical ends: "Hospitals treat, not cure, patients." (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, p. 357) For CSA, this would mean not talking about positioning on specific issues such as immigration or same-sex marriage, but instead referring to the *(b) more general and consensual issues*. A concrete example: a company does not talk about its position on current and controversial social issues such as immigration or discrimination, but focuses on the more general, overarching, and consensual topic of 'social cohesion'. At this overarching level, the company avoids taking an explicit position on a controversial issue, without having to entirely avoid taking a stance on social issues.

Another option that remains relatively close to this is: *(c) vague and ambiguous statements* (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Ambiguous statements fulfill the normative expectation of public positioning but minimize the risk of negative effects because they are acceptable to both

supporters and opponents of an issue. This strategic ambiguity (Eisenberg, 1984) is actually attributed more to CSR (Park & Jiang, 2023; Song & Choi, 2023), but could also become a means of CSA through ambiguous clarity. Ambiguous clarity is when “different addressees with different points of view each interpret something unambiguously – but divergently” (Hoffjann, 2022, p. 295). In communication practice, this could be implemented with mixed messages by including both the arguments of one side (e.g. the rights and important contribution of immigrants to a company and society) and the opposing side (e.g. the need to protect national borders) in a statement (Hoffjann, 2025).

A final form of decoupling is a *(d) very defensive communication strategy on CSA issues* when a company provides only brief and circumspect information about its position on controversial issues in hidden areas of the corporate website or in company reports. This corresponds to the defensive approach of many companies to CSR issues (Roszkowska-Menkes & Aluchna, 2017).

If one combines the previously outlined option of ‘silence’ on political issues with, for example, strict anti-discrimination guidelines for a company, one could ultimately derive the option of *(e) reversed decoupling*: While hypocrisy and greenwashing are generally used today to describe when a company advertises itself as sustainable, for example, but does not act sustainably in its day-to-day operations (Pacheco-Ortiz et al., 2024), reversed decoupling could in practice look like: a company would fulfill the institutional expectation of anti-discrimination with its rules, i.e. its formal structure, but would not talk about this publicly.

Limitations and future research

This paper discusses the impact on companies and on societal polarization of the increasingly widespread practice of CSA. It has become clear that CSA appears to be a poison for society and a placebo for companies, at best. To continue this metaphor, one could call it a ‘sweet

poison,’ since many companies and stakeholders expect benefits from CSA campaigns: Some want to use it to improve their reputation, while others hope it will strengthen their point of view so that it prevails in the societal debate. Ultimately, however, CSA first and foremost results in companies taking sides in a polarized discourse. This only serves to deepen, widen, and consolidate the rifts that give rise to societal polarization in the first place. It is to be expected that the practice will spread even further in polarizing Western societies and become fully institutionalized in the process. The arguments outlined above illustrate how difficult it already is for companies to defend themselves against normative pressure.

The *limitations* of the paper result in particular from its conceptual character. Not only the degree of polarization between the various Western democracies, but also the institutionalization of CSA differ significantly. These national and cultural differences could not be taken into account here and are just one example of the great need for research on CSA, which is still limited primarily to the US perspective. A closer look at national differences would quickly reveal the importance of the respective historical experience in this context. In a country like Germany, for example, the justified objection that companies should also publicly speak out against right-wing populism and in favor of immigrants is likely to be quickly raised against the communicative solutions outlined. After all, during the rise of the Nazis, many companies remained silent for opportunistic reasons in order to facilitate business with the Nazis (Pauwels, 2017). Another central limitation of the paper is undoubtedly the fact that many considerations could not be substantiated with empirical findings due to a lack of studies. This applies to central considerations of the paper: from the diffusion of CSA practice to the loss of non-political spaces for dialogue in CSA-driving companies and to the impact on societal polarization.

On the other hand, the conceptual character of the paper has revealed entirely *new directions for future research*. This begins with (a) an overview of previous CSA research. In

recent years, numerous – often experimental – surveys have been conducted on the public position of companies on controversial issues. Even if different concepts such as CSA, corporate political advocacy, brand activism, or CEO activism have been used, there are numerous empirical findings on the effects on various stakeholders. However, the sometimes surprisingly short literature reviews in these studies give the impression that, even now, there is no clear overview of the current state of research. Therefore, there is an urgent need for the available findings to be examined in a systematic review to determine reliable conclusions and identify research gaps.

In addition to experimental studies, (b) medium-term case studies with a multi-method design of CSA-driving companies would be desirable. On the one hand, changes in attitudes among various stakeholders such as employees and customers, as well as changes in their composition due to boycotts and buycotts among customers, as well as resignations and deliberate applications among employees would be exciting. Qualitative interviews with employees could also be used to investigate changes in internal spaces for dialogue and the corporate culture.

So far, (c) studies that examine the impact on society and societal polarization have been a complete blank. This is all the more surprising given that societal polarization is the oft-cited starting point for CSA. As apparent as the need for research is here, the challenges facing research into social impact are just as obvious. This is because the long-term societal effects of CSA activities, which are, of course, only one of many factors for polarization, cannot be measured in experimental surveys. Regular panel surveys of stakeholders from companies with and without CSA activities would be conceivable here in order to be able to measure effects on polarization in the long-term, or at least the medium-term.

Finally, it is surprising how seldom CSA has been studied from the communicator's perspective. First of all, explorative qualitative interview studies seem necessary here in order

to learn something about the motives, decision-making processes and experiences of CSA activities. It is to be expected that the CEO plays a more significant role in the decision on CSA topics than on other issues. Conversely, it could follow that the communication department is more often in an executive role when it comes to CSA issues. Based on this, communicator surveys would/could be helpful in gaining insights into the spread of CSA practices, among other things.

What other *practical implications* arise from the paper beyond the solutions mentioned in the concluding chapter? The paper has shown that CSA primarily involves risks and disadvantages for companies. Companies should therefore not take a hasty public stance on current and controversial social issues, but should instead gather a survey of their customers' and especially their employees' opinions on the issue. Although this can be criticized as opportunistic, in the medium term it not only serves to maintain peace within the company, but also, to some extent at least, reduces societal polarization in the long term by identifying and avoiding potential conflicts within the company. Overall, CSA activities should be examined more critically in communication practice to identify and understand their consequences for the company itself and for societal polarization.

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